

ACTION

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A-218

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HANDLING INDICATOR

TO : DEPARTMENT OF STATE

FROM : Amembassy PHNOM PENH

SUBJECT : Sangkum Establishes Limited Free Election DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR

REF : A-311 of April 19, 1962

BEGIN UNCLASSIFIED

Prince NORODOM SIHANOUK's political movement, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, announced on September 28 that it would not designate any official Sangkum candidates in future elections to the Cambodian National Assembly except in constituencies where an "adversary of the Sangkum" was running.

An official Sangkum communiqué, carried in the September 28 official bulletin of the Ministry of Information, announced that "conforming to the very high instructions of Samdech Sahachivin /Sihanouk/" all members of the Sangkum were free to present themselves as candidates both for the upcoming by-election and for future general elections for the National Assembly. The communiqué went on to say, however, that "if an adversary of the Sangkum also presented himself as a candidate in these elections, the Sangkum reserved to itself the right to choose among the candidates of its movement the candidate that it judged best, so that the electors could vote for him en bloc and that their votes would not be futilely dispersed at the risk of thus serving the adversary". END UNCLASSIFIED

GROUP 3

Downgraded at 12-year intervals,
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FORM 4-62 DS-323

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Contents and Classification Approved by:

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Clearances:

00:10:00:00:00

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BEGIN CONFIDENTIAL

COMMENT:

In the past the Sangkum has designated a single Sangkum candidate for each Assembly seat (A-311, April 19, 1962). The 1962 elections presented the spectacle of 77 Sangkum candidates running unopposed for the 77 National Assembly seats (A-4, July 2, 1962).

On the surface a change in policy to permit competition within the ranks of the Sangkum represents a considerable extension of democratic practice in Cambodia. Since almost all political inclinations are represented in the Sangkum by active politicians, an election in which Sangkum members compete against one another for votes could mean a true clash of views and at least the first step towards free elections.

The change in policy apparently stems from many sources. Sihanouk has often criticized Assembly deputies for what he calls their factionalism and lack of sense of responsibility. He has occasionally threatened to turn to the people in order to bring fractious deputies to heel. During the March Government crisis, Sihanouk threatened to dissolve both the Sangkum and the Assembly and to hold new elections in which there would be no Sangkum candidates. During his May and June attacks on leftist Assembly deputies, the Prince threatened to hold a national referendum on the deputies, so as to "let the people judge" their representatives. At the July 20 opening of the second year of the 5th National Assembly, Sihanouk again censured factionalism and urged the deputies to consult more often with their constituents in order to develop more of a sense of civic responsibility. His introduction of the procedure of allowing the people to choose from among Sangkum candidates at this time may be an attempt to instill this sense in the deputies. ^{On the other hand} it can ~~also~~ serve as a reminder to the numerous Assembly deputies who have no connection with their constituencies and who rarely go to visit them how much their present political prominence depends on the Prince's will. However, should this system in fact be applied over a period of time, Sihanouk's almost complete control of the deputies might weaken as they develop their own bases of power in their constituencies.

The new approach will be tested in the upcoming Chup by-election to fill the seat left vacant by HING KUNTHEL, who resigned his seat on September 13 in order to continue his studies in France. Prior to the Sangkum announcement, fourteen people had applied for the Sangkum nomination. Now it appears that upwards of fifty candidates will be running in the election, indicating that the Sangkum change

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in policy has struck a responsive chord among its members. Whether the new system will in fact be applied in the next general election (scheduled for 1966) is problematical, despite the communiqué's affirmation that it will be; Sihanouk may not be willing to reduce his power to the extent of giving up his ability to choose National Assembly deputies. The enunciation of the idea at this time appears to be motivated in part by Sihanouk's sensitivity to the comments of foreign observers, many of whom have noted the unusual character of the 1962 election. The implementation of a policy of freedom of choice within the Sangkum, in a single by-election, could provide evidence with which to refute charges of undemocratic practice and to exhibit Cambodian democracy. Moreover, a single by-election also carries no threat to Sihanouk's power. END
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For the Ambassador:



Alf E. Bergesen
First Secretary of Embassy

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